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ABSTRACT

The effect of client reluctance, or resistance to professional assistance, has received little attention in the research on counseling effectiveness. At the college level, where most counseling is short-term in nature, this issue is especially crucial. In a short-term college counseling situation, it was found that intake measures of client reluctance were negatively correlated with client-perceived satisfaction and improvement; negatively related to degree of congruence between perceived problem and perceived emphasis of the agency; and positively correlated with premature termination in counseling. No differences were found between vocational and personal problem groups on measures of client reluctance, satisfaction, or improvement. Client reluctance was shown to be a crucial variable to the outcome of counseling. Implications for these findings on college student personnel work are discussed. (Author)

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The Relationship Between Client Reluctance and Counseling Effectiveness

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Abstract

The effect of client reluctance, resistance to professional assistance, has received little attention in the research on counseling effectiveness. At the college level, where most counseling is short-term in nature, this issue is especially crucial. In a short-term college counseling situation, it was found that intake measures of client reluctance were: a) negatively correlated with client-perceived satisfaction and improvement; b) negatively related to degree of congruence between perceived problem and perceived emphasis of the agency, and c) positively correlated with premature termination in counseling. No differences were found between vocational and personal problem groups on measures of client reluctance, satisfaction, or improvement. Client reluctance was shown to be a crucial variable to the outcome of counseling. Implications for these findings on college student personnel work are discussed.

The Relationship Between Client Reluctance and Counseling Effectiveness

Most student personnel workers whether counselors or administrators would agree on the importance of a facilitative relationship for the ultimate success or failure of the helping process. However, little attention has been directed toward one of the key elements for establishing any type of helping relationship, client reluctance. From a general perspective, reluctance can be viewed as an unwillingness or involuntariness, either explicit or implicit, which manifests itself as a desire not to cooperate. Either partially or totally, the prospective client does not want to be a client in the first place (Vriend & Dyer, 1973).

While most counseling approaches (e.g. Carkhuff, 1969; Combs, Avila & Purkey, 1971; Krumboltz & Thoreson, 1969; Rogers, 1942) in their theoretical formulations consider willingness of the client to be crucial to successful outcomes, little empirical research has been directed toward examining the effects of client reluctance on the subsequent effectiveness of counseling.

The issue of reluctance, as a critical concern for student personnel, is emphasized by the short-term nature of the services

which they provide. When little time is available to resolve the initial negative reactions to being seen as a client, incongruent expectations for counseling, and possible negative public images of the agencies involved, the resultant effects will have damaging consequences for student personnel helping services. Considering Vriend and Dyer's (1973) conclusion that the majority of clients who visit a counselor may be classified as reluctant or involuntary to some degree, one's attention should be directed to the importance of this issue. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between client reluctance and outcome measures of self-reported counseling effectiveness. Toward this end a measure to assess pre-counseling client reluctance at intake was developed and follow-up measures of counseling outcomes were obtained from college counseling service clients.

Four hypotheses were tested. It was predicted that client reluctance is a) negatively related to the outcome measures of client-perceived satisfaction and improvement; b) greater for clients presenting vocational rather than personal problems; c) less for clients displaying congruity or agreement between their stated problem and their perception of the agency's emphasis than for clients who were incongruent in this respect; and d) directly related to premature termination in counseling.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 87 college students, 45 male and 42 female, the total client population seeking individual counseling at the Bucknell University Counseling Service during a regular academic semester. The subjects ranged in age from 18 to 25 with a mean age of 19.7 years.

Measurement of variables

The outcome measures of counseling, client-perceived improvement and satisfaction, were obtained from the Counseling Services Assessment Blank (Hurst, Weigel, Thatcher, Nyman, 1969) a self-report questionnaire measuring the client's attitude toward the experience of counseling. The questionnaire requires clients to indicate on a 6-point rating scale the degree to which the services received helped in each of five problem areas: lack of information or understanding about self; lack of information or understanding about the environment; conflict within self; conflict with significant others; and lack of a specific skill. Client perceived improvement was measured by client ratings of these problem areas, with two measures obtained for each client: the rating given the primary problem area and the total ratings for all problem areas.

Client satisfaction was determined from client ratings on

the Counseling Services Assessment Blank given in three categories: overall counseling experience; individual counseling experience; and the helpfulness of the individual counselor.

Client reluctance was measured by a 7-point rating scale devised from responses to the Mooney Problem Checklist (Mooney & Gordon, 1950) with low scores indicating minimal reluctance and high scores indicating maximal reluctance on the part of the client. Criteria for rating each client were based upon expressions of uncooperativeness, negative predispositions and expectations about the counseling process, and a lack of self-disclosure about the presenting problem. For example, a reluctance score of 7 was given to the clients who chose not to complete any part of the Mooney Problem Checklist at the time of intake. A score of 1 was assigned to the clients who provided a well stated problem on the Mooney and made no remarks indicating their unwillingness to be seen as clients for counseling. Thus the criteria from the Mooney Problem Checklist provided indications of varying degrees of client volition ranging from scores of 1 to 7. Two psychology graduate students, naive to the purposes of the study were trained to apply the criteria to a sample of 34 clients not included in this study. Subsequent interrater reliability coefficients on the 87 subjects of this study yielded a Pearson product moment coefficient of +.97 between the two raters. Both raters scores were added together

for a total reluctance score ranging from 2 to 14.

Congruence or noncongruence between client perception of the agency's emphasis and their stated problem was assessed directly from responses given on items of the Counseling Services Assessment Blank. Premature termination was operationally defined as failure to continue an agreed-upon counseling contract and thus, termination of counseling.

Procedure

All clients who voluntarily sought counseling were given the Mooney Problem Checklist at intake and were assigned to one of three staff counselors, two males and one female. The counselors were not aware of the exact purpose of the study. Three weeks after the terminal appointment, each client was asked to complete the Counseling Services Assessment Blank to evaluate the effectiveness of the counseling that was received. Assessments were sent with stamped, self-addressed envelopes together with a letter from the Director of the agency requesting the anonymous evaluations. Two follow-up requests resulted in 87 respondents representing 89 percent of the entire client population that semester. Examination of the remaining 11 percent nonrespondents indicated no differences between groups in terms of age, sex, college class distribution, or type of problem presented at intake.

Results

The central hypothesis of this study was supported by the correlations between client reluctance and measures of client-perceived improvement and satisfaction. As predicted, the correlations presented in Table 1 are all negative and significantly different from zero.

Insert Table 1 about here

Student's t for independent samples was used to test for differences between personal problem and vocational problem groups on measures of client reluctance, client-perceived improvement, and satisfaction. No significant differences were found on these measures. However, the vocational problem subjects did exhibit greater variability on client reluctance that the personal problem group ($F=2.15, p < .05$).

Congruent and noncongruent client groups were compared on measures of client reluctance, client-perceived improvement and satisfaction. As expected, clients whose perception of the emphasis of the agency matched their problem (congruent) were significantly less reluctant with a mean of 6.01, S.D. = 3.43 than clients whose perception did not match their problem (noncongruent) with a mean of 7.60, S.D.=4.65 ($t(85) = 2.01$, $p < .05$).

No differences were found between these groups on measures of perceived improvement or satisfaction.

A point-biserial correlation between client reluctance and premature termination of counseling was found to be +.18, $p < .05$. Thus, the prediction of a positive relationship between client reluctance and premature termination was supported.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide support for the major hypothesis that pre-counseling client reluctance is related to client-perceived improvement and satisfaction in a short-term counseling situation. This relationship would appear to have considerable implication for student personnel work where the majority of counseling is completed on a short-term basis with little time to resolve pre-counseling reluctance no matter the degree of subtlety. The relevance of client reluctance, as a purely practical concern for the effectiveness of counseling efforts, would indicate that considerable attention should be directed toward the reluctant client if meaningful and effective counseling programs are to be undertaken with the college student. While reluctance was operationally defined from a considerably broad base, it was assessed in this study in its more subtle form. One would probably expect the overtly reluctant client to not involve him or herself in any counseling endeavor. Yet,

even with this less reluctant client, as the study demonstrated, the effectiveness of individual counseling was significantly limited.

The data did suggest that the Mooney Problem Checklist could provide some index of initial reluctance to counseling. This information, either assessed by an intake questionnaire or personal interview with the client, would appear to be a crucial first step in resolving a potential source of difficulty for effective counseling.

The finding of greater reluctance for noncongruent clients than clients whose perceptions are congruent with their stated problem is consistent with previous research on expectations and perception of counselor role and treatment goals (Goodstein & Grigg, 1959; Wilkins, 1973). This result also suggests another potential source of reluctance in counseling; the public image of the agency involved. If prospective clients feel that a service is primarily emphasizing a certain form of counseling or attracting a certain type of client, regardless of the validity of these assumptions, the subsequent measures of effectiveness will be lessened unless the inconsistencies are resolved. As the study suggests, this resolution should be accomplished as early in the counseling as possible in order to avoid the premature termination which was evidenced in this study.

The study failed to find difference between vocational and personal problem groups on measures of client reluctance, improvement, or satisfaction. The difficulty in distinguishing between these two groups could have affected the results. While mean reluctance scores were not significant, variability in reluctance for vocational clients was significantly greater than for personal problem clients. This is similar to finding by Weigel, Cochenour, & Russel (1967) who found that vocational clients had higher proportions of negative responses in evaluating their counseling than personal problem clients. At any event, there is nothing substantial to assume that vocational clients are any more reluctant than clients with personal problems. It would seem that the same concerns are operating in terms of client reluctance for both groups.

The evidence presented would suggest that client reluctance is an important determiner of the potential success of short-term counseling efforts with college students. It would appear that early identification and resolution of this reluctance is an essential element of the counseling process. This effort can be readily accomplished by simple structuring, explaining the counseling process and being receptive to any questions, concerns, or subtle indications of reluctance, during the initial contact with clients. Without this initial effort to minimize client reluctance, the effectiveness of counseling efforts will be hindered.

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Table 1

Pearson Product Moment Correlations of Reluctance with Client-perceived Improvement and Satisfaction[a]

Variable	r
Client-perceived Improvement in:	
Primary Problem Area	-.51*
All problem areas	-.30*
Client-perceived Satisfaction with:	
Individual Counseling Experience	-.27*
Overall Counseling Experience	-.30*
Helpfulness of Counselor	-.29*

Note. Scoring of variables is from a low score of 1 to a high score of 6.

[a] N=87

*p < .01